Women’s Careers: Beyond the Stereotypical Discourses

Whereas traditional definitions of career reflected male career patterns in the mid twentieth century by referencing hierarchical posts within bounded organisations, contemporary definitions are now more likely to emphasise the sequential working roles that evolve over time (Arthur et al 1989, p.8) Women’s careers have often encompassed paid work in the formal economy at the same time as significant domestic or other caring commitments. The discourse around these careers often portrays extremes: women may be shown either as struggling to meet their many commitments (often perceived as doing none of them effectively) or as focussed single-mindedly on career, with no time for a personal life. Traditional career theory was built around models of men’s careers, but some contemporary work now seeks specifically to illuminate and offer explanations of women’s career experiences (eg Bimrose et al 2015).

In the UK, government statistics show that women are more likely to work part time and/or in sectors offering low pay, such as caring, administrative support or parts of the education system. At the other end of the spectrum, where women are working at senior levels the so-called ‘glass ceiling’ effect is often offered as an explanation for why they do not reach the most senior positions in organisations. Some research (eg Ryan and Haslam 2005) has also suggested that a ‘glass cliff’ might exist, meaning that women are often appointed to posts in which it will be difficult to succeed.

In my research I am exploring the particularities of the careers of three women who hold senior professional posts, looking specifically at the factors that have influenced those careers. The work is also auto/biographical in character. My presentation will discuss how far these women’s career narratives reflect some of the popular discourses and fit within overarching theories.

References:

Arthur, M., Hall, D., & Lawrence, B. (eds) (1989) *Handbook of Career Theory* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bimrose, J., McMahon, M., Watson, M. (eds) (2013) *Women’s careers throughout the lifespan* Routledge: Abingdon.

Ryan, M. & Haslam, A., (2005) ‘The glass cliff: evidence that women are over-represented in precarious leadership positions’ in *British Journal of Management* 16(2), pp. 81-90.